

# Ray insists he's innocent

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — James Earl Ray will awaken on today's Martin Luther King holiday in his cell, a concrete cube with no bars and a 4-inch-wide glass slit for a window. Then, he'll go to work.

Behind 12-foot razor wire fences at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the man serving 99 years as King's assassin will resume his quest to prove he is innocent, a claim he repeats in a new autobiography.

Once, Ray sought escape by hiding in a bread truck. He now combs the prison law library for a legal way out. A string of lawsuits seek investigative documents to build his case for a trial. He is shopping for a judge who will order one.

Once in court, he vows to prove he was a dupe of a mysterious middleman named "Raoul" in one of the century's most spectacular murder conspiracies.

Ray's new book, "Who Killed Martin Luther King?," makes a case that he was coerced into pleading guilty and that he was never anything more than "a two-bit career criminal."

"Why," he writes, "if official America is so firmly convinced that I pulled the trigger of the rifle that killed Martin Luther King, is there so much reluctance to allow me to have a trial and fully air the evidence?"

King's civil rights crusade won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In early April 1968 he went to Memphis, where sanitation workers, most of them black, were striking for better pay and an end to discrimination.

He stirred a crowd with a speech that's memorized by children now, declaring, "I've been to the mountaintop." After spending much of April 4 planning a demonstration,

he stepped onto his balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

At 6:01 p.m., a single rifle shot struck King in the head.

Investigators following leads across continents arrested James Earl Ray in London in June. The following March, Ray pleaded guilty to the killing.

In his new book, Ray calls the court proceeding a sham, but he registered the same sentiment before he left the courtroom.

Then-U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark had said immediately after the shooting that a lone assassin killed King; no conspiracy existed. When Ray pleaded guilty, he told the judge: "The only thing that I have to say is that I can't agree with Mr. Clark."

Nine years later, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded a conspiracy did exist. Its 1978 report, based on a two-year investigation, said Ray shot King and that a St. Louis-based conspiracy of bigots was behind the killing.

The question is posed in capital letters on his book's cover: Who killed Martin Luther King? But what is Ray's answer?

The book's 285 pages only hint at answers: Organized crime? Shadowy individuals in Louisiana? The FBI?

Many who have interviewed Ray sense that he's hiding some of what he knows.

Researcher Philip Melanson believes several people helped Ray before and after the assassination, but he was kept at arm's length by the principal conspirators.

"He could have been recruited by people who were on the fringe," said Mr. Melanson, who teaches at Southeastern Massachusetts University. "I don't know that he was entrusted with enough informa-

tion . . . that he could provide specifics that would solve the case."

At the prison, Ray was asked if he was revealing only enough to tantalize the public and get back into court but not enough to endanger himself by giving away identities.

"No, I don't think there's anything to that," said Ray, now 63.

He is forthright about his guilty plea. He entered it, he says, only after being subjected to solitary confinement for months in a cell with constant surveillance by closed-circuit TV cameras and bright lights kept on 24 hours a day.

He details longstanding charges that his lawyers compromised his defense so they could win lucrative publishing contracts for writing about the case. And he tries to discredit witnesses used against him.

Whether his book holds significant revelations, Ray said, "I think the main thing now is that a lot of people are starting to demand a new trial — Jesse Jackson and people like that."

Besides the Rev. Jackson, at least two groups in Washington are lobbying for the sealed files to be opened.

"There's nothing in those files that would change the course of American history," Mr. Stokes responded by phone from his Capitol office.

Ray scoffs: "You're supposed to trust politicians? That's like me saying, 'Trust me.'"

"Hell, look at the records! They've got the same evidence today as they had 20-some years ago."

A television commentator Ray heard recently spoke of the lingering doubts about whether Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed President Kennedy: "If Oswald had just lived," he said, "they'd have had a trial and it would have cleared this all up, and the American people would have been satisfied."

"Well, in my case, I'm still living," Ray said. "This could have been solved years ago. Still could be. I have serious doubts that it will."